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Pakistanis Deny Nuclear-Arms Report

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ISLAMABAD, Pakistan, Nov. 4—Top-ranking Pakistani officials today rejected reported claims in classified U.S. intelligence reports that this country is developing weapons-grade enriched uranium and a triggering mechanism for a nuclear device.

"Pakistan does not have and is not producing highly enriched uranium necessary for a nuclear explosive device," Foreign Secretary Abdul Sattar said. "Pakistan's research program aims at developing a low-level, fuel-grade enrichment capability for the Cheshma nuclear power project. While some progress has been made in that direction, the enrichment level has remained well within limits of the research and development program for fuel."

Citing a classified Defense Intelligence Agency report, The Washington Post reported from Washington today that Pakistan had succeeded in enriching uranium to 93.5 percent at its nuclear plant at Kahuta and that two explosions this year indicated continuing Pakistani efforts to develop the complex mechanisms necessary to set off a nuclear explosion. The tests used conventional, nonnuclear explosives.

The status of the Pakistani nuclear program is a critical one in the relationship between the United States and this South Asian nation. President Reagan must certify each year that Pakistan does not possess or is not building a nuclear device in order for the multibillion-dollar U.S. aid package to continue. He sent the last such certification to Congress last week.

Pakistani officials are always sensitive to any public comment about their nuclear program, which they insist is for peaceful purposes, but are especially so now because the aid program faces two key tests in Congress in the coming months.

Congress will be acting soon on a new \$4.02 billion, six-year military and economic assistance package that is critical to Pakistan's needs in both areas. In addition, the legislation requiring presidential certification on the nuclear program comes up for renewal this spring and is expected to provide the focal point for a major congressional reconsideration of the nuclear issue and its role in U.S.-Pakistani relations.

The Reagan administration, following the lead of president Carter, has strengthened ties with Pakistan as part of efforts to oppose the Soviet presence in Afghanistan. The multimillion-dollar U.S. assistance program to Afghan guerrilla forces is channeled through Pakistan, although the countries formally deny it.

This has led to some suggestions that Washington is willing to look the other way when it comes to Islamabad's nuclear program so as not to jeopardize its Afghan policy or other possible areas of cooperation, including intelligence-gathering activities.

Specialists say Pakistan has pursued development of nuclear-weapons capacity since its rival and South Asian neighbor India exploded what it called a peaceful nuclear device in 1974.

While Indian officials also denied possessing nuclear weapons, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi has said several times recently that his country is capable of building a weapon if necessary—generally considered a reference to a possible provocation by Pakistan.

Raja Ramanna, the head of India's Atomic Energy Commission, said today in New Delhi, in response to the reports about Pakistani enrichment progress, that "if this country requires enriched uranium, we can produce enriched uranium."

Pakistani President Mohammed Zia ul-Haq pledged in 1984 not to develop weapons-grade uranium and Pakistani officials today again

denied that this country is developing nuclear weapons.

Responding to the charge that it is conducting research on the critical trigger mechanism, Sattar said, "If you are not developing the whole, you are not developing the part either."

Information Secretary Abdul Majid Mufti also rejected the reported U.S. intelligence reports, saying, "We deny it. It is totally out of this world."

"As a matter of policy, the government of Pakistan is opposed to the proliferation of nuclear weapons in the South Asian region," Sattar said. "It remains willing now as in the past to join in establishing a nuclear weapons-free zone in South Asia which would bring all nuclear facilities in the region under international inspection and safeguards."

The London Financial Times reported last week that Britain had prevented Pakistan from buying equipment that could be used as an alternative to high explosives for triggering a nuclear reaction.

"An inquiry for the purchase of a flash discharge X-ray machine and a high-speed camera, together worth [about \$142,000] was received earlier this year" by Britain's government company responsible for arms sales, the daily reported. It said the machine sought was smaller than those requiring export licenses but that recent research had shown it capable of serving as a trigger.